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**THE WRITINGS OF MUSLIMS:
TRACES OF A CHRISTIAN WITNESS TO DIVINE MERCY**



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ABSTRACT: One side of Christian-Muslim relations, still largely unexplored, is the way in which Christian-Muslim encounter offers a spiritual forum, not for a “modern” discovery of the self in the mirror of the other, but for members of the two traditions to help one another – knowingly or unknowingly, directly or indirectly – discern a richer sense of the workings of God in their lives. Here, I consider one aspect of this side of the history of Christian-Muslim relations, focusing on a selection of writings that speak to the way in which Muslims have looked to a distinctly if not exclusively Christian idea, God’s merciful recreation of the human condition, to give expression to *their own* spiritual experiences and insights. In this sense, the encounter is best seen not in terms of causal influence but as a common space in which God’s ways are more fully realized.

In a recent article, David Marshall surveys a wide range of works on Christian theological engagement with Islam that have appeared over the last years in English, French, and German.¹ To judge from this survey, it seems that a new niche in western writings on Islam is taking shape. Despite varied conclusions among Christian theologians who write on Islam, one might speak of this emergent niche as a Christian approach that views Islam as being in a profoundly positive relation to Christianity and as effectively sharing in its mission. Be that as it may, Marshall notes, rightly, I believe, that not all Christian theologians writing on Islam are adequately versed in Islamic Studies. He

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¹ D. Marshall, “Christian Theological Engagement with Islam: A Survey of Recent Publications”, *The Ecumenical Review* 73 (2021) 892-911. Marshall has offered other such surveys of Christian theological engagement with Islam. See D. Marshall, “Muhammad in Contemporary Christian Theological Reflections”, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 24 (2013) 161-172; and “Roman Catholic Approaches to the Qur’an since Vatican II”, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 25 (2014) 89-100.

makes the plea that “Christian theological engagement with Islam requires knowledge of both Christianity and Islam.”² I would add knowledge of the lived experiences of Christian communities in Muslim societies. The “latest insights” of western theologians can be incomprehensible to Christian communities that have long lived under Islam.

Here, I propose to do something different. I was trained in a department of Near Eastern Studies. In other words, I was taught to read the texts of Islam across centuries and across cultures. This education was not for theological purposes. Nevertheless, I have long been struck by the way in which these texts suggest that Muslims have actually been “listening” to Christians over the centuries, particularly when it comes to knowledge of the workings of divine mercy. My aim here is not to document a history of “influences and borrowings.”³ More specifically, I offer reflections on a selection of texts as evidence of the way in which Christian-Muslim encounter has served as a common space for a fuller realization of God’s manner of dealing with humanity (i.e., mercifully). To be sure, polemics has a place in the history of Christian-Muslim relations. Here, I highlight the way in which Christian-Muslim encounter has included a Christian witness to the workings of divine mercy that has been noticed by Muslims, not as something for the latter to “borrow” but as a perspective by which to discern their own spiritual experiences and insights.

Thus, on the basis of Muslim writings, it can be seen that one aspect of Christian theological engagement with Islam, the theme of this issue of *Islamochristiana*, is a shared witness to divine mercy. The writings I survey below suggest a causal relation – that the Christian witness to divine mercy has enriched Muslim understanding of the workings of divine mercy – but I emphasize the shared nature of the witness. The Christian witness to divine mercy made sense to Muslims because it made sense of the revelation of divine mercy to them. That is, the Christian witness to divine mercy was seen by Muslims not as foreign to but as clarifying what they knew of divine mercy. They could therefore engage it on their own theological terms rather than those of Christianity. That is, divine mercy was made known to Muslims through the revelation of the Qur’ān, but one aspect of its meaning, as we will see, has only been fully disclosed, it would seem, through Christian-Muslim theological engagement. In other words, Muslims know divine mercy, but its meaning has been enriched through such engagement. Christian-Muslim encounter has, then, long included a joint witness to divine mercy at work in the world even while the two communities have guarded their respective theological boundaries.

The topic is hardly new,⁴ but our scholarly reflections must always be attuned to

² Marshall, “Christian Theological Engagement with Islam”, 909-910.

³ I seek to unearth a subtler aspect of Christian-Muslim encounter even if not denying the many instances of a more conscious usage of the other’s theological categories. See A. Treiger, “Mutual Influences and Borrowings”, in D. Thomas (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on Christian-Muslim Relations*, Routledge, London-New York 2018, 194-206.

⁴ Of the many studies on mercy in Islam and Christianity, including Christian-Muslim

current realities, which, as earlier suggested, theologians in the West writing on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations tend to ignore. The question of a joint Christian-Muslim witness to divine mercy was most recently raised by the death of the Palestinian-American journalist, Shireen Abu Akleh (1971-2022), killed on May 11, 2022, most likely by the Israeli Defense Forces, while reporting from Jenin in the West Bank. Her twenty-five years covering the occupied territories for Al Jazeera had made her a household name, beloved for her analysis and well-known signoffs. Indeed, she had become the icon of the Palestinian cause. It was, then, a great shock for people to see priests presiding over her funeral. The hero of the cause dear to so many Muslims was a Christian! The internet exploded from Morocco to Iraq and beyond with heated debate. Could Shireen know divine mercy as a non-Muslim? Could the millions of Muslims who recognized her commitment to righteousness ask God to show her mercy and extend forgiveness to her – and permit her entry into the gardens of paradise – when she was actually not a Muslim?

The dissonance was off the charts. In the face of statements by religious scholars that those who die without believing in the message of Muhammad have no hope of divine mercy, many responded angrily, insisting that Shireen was secure (*amīna*) with God. How could such a great soul be in hellfire? Others, in lengthy videos, offered a more nuanced approach, suggesting that she could be counted a Muslim either on the basis of the positive things she had said about the holy sites of Islam in Jerusalem and the holy month of Ramadan or on the basis of the values of Islam that she embodied in her life. By this view, she had submitted to God – Islam being the act of submitting to God – even if she was not ostensibly part of the community of Muhammad.⁵ Many simply cited the Qur'ānic verse that speaks of God's mercy as all-encompassing (Q 7:156), while others retorted that the verse in question goes on to specify those for whom divine mercy is decreed, namely those who fear God, make a material offering (*zakāt*, i.e., to God's cause), and believe in God's signs (*āyāt*, i.e., as promulgated by the Prophet Muhammad).

The case of Shireen Abu Akleh is a worthy topic for a doctoral dissertation on Christian-Muslim relations. I mention it here only to suggest that the question of a joint Christian-Muslim witness to divine mercy is one that is actually never decisively answered. What are the workings of divine mercy? How is it received? On the basis of religious affiliation? Or is the process subtler? If so, how can we speak about it in concrete terms? It is unsatisfying to say that the matter is best left to God. While divine mercy is God's prerogative, humans long for clarity. In what follows, I hope to offer a bit of clarity by surveying a handful of Muslim writings that seem to draw on

dialogue on mercy as a vital point of Christian-Muslim relations, I cite only the proceedings of the 2016 conference in Rome: V. Cottini, F. Körner, D. R. Sarrió Cucarella (eds.), *Rahma: Muslim and Christian Studies in Mercy*, Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica, Rome 2018.

⁵ As far as I know, no one made the argument that the culture of the Arabs is home to multiple divinely accepted religions.

Christian understandings of divine mercy. Again, we are not to think of the process as a kind of borrowing. Rather, as I see it, the fact that Muslims have listened, as it were, to Christian understandings of divine mercy suggests that they have themselves longed for a more precise knowledge of divine mercy as revealed to them. Again, I am not at all suggesting that Muslims don't know divine mercy in its fullness, only that they have found in Christian-Muslim engagement a fuller explanation of one aspect of their own experience of it. We conclude by considering two questions: Why have Muslims been drawn to a Christian witness to divine mercy for clarification of their experience? And what does this aspect of Christian-Muslim encounter tell us about the nature and purpose of Christian theological engagement with Islam?

Ibn Sa'd – The Noble Character of the Prophet

We begin our survey with Ibn Sa'd (d. 844), who was born in Basra and settled in Baghdad where he belonged to scholarly circles whose members viewed the history of Islam as shaped not by caliphs – the rulers of the domain of Islam and leaders of the jihad against infidels – but by righteous figures, versed in the communal tradition (*sunna*), who had moral impact in their communities even while keeping a distance from the worldly power that the structures of the caliphate had come to represent. In other words, in the circles to which Ibn Sa'd belonged, there was a sense that the umma had become compromised by the world (*al-dunyā*).

Ibn Sa'd is mainly remembered for his voluminous collection of biographies of scholarly figures who had expertise in the tradition of prophetic teachings that had been passed down from the prophet's companions and that were seen in his circles as the body of sovereign norms meant to establish the order of Islam in society. Known as *The Greatest Classes of Believers*,⁶ Ibn Sa'd's collection of biographies, which stretch across Islam's first centuries, leaves one with the impression of Islam as a moral domain more so than a governmental one, emerging from the prophet and expanding geographically from one generation to the next as an ever-growing network of scholars. Ibn Sa'd's work captures a heritage of pious learning in literary form with the purpose not simply of transmitting knowledge of the communal tradition but more specifically of transferring the ethical character of those who embodied it to future generations.

In the biography of the prophet, which occupies the first two volumes of the edition that I have used, a report describes him as having come to open eyes that were blind, to make ears that were deaf hear, to circumcise hearts that were uncircumcised, and to make straight a moral tradition that had become crooked (*sunna kānat 'awgā'*).⁷

⁶ Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 'Alī Muḥammad 'Umar (ed.), 11 vols., Maktabat al-Ḥānī, Cairo 2001.

⁷ Ibid., vol. 1, 311.

The report, which appears in a section on “The Description of the Messenger of God in the Torah and Gospel”, calls to mind biblical passages that anticipate a remaking of the human condition. Jeremiah 9:26 describes all the House of Israel as uncircumcised in heart, and Habakkuk 1:4 states that justice has been made crooked. There is need for a new Adam, and the New Testament speaks of Jesus’s ministry as a remaking of the human condition. He makes the deaf hear (Mark 7:37) and not only gives sight to a man blind from birth (John 9:1-12) but also conveys a new understanding of what it means to see (John 9:35-41). All that is crooked shall be made straight (Luke 3:5, cf. Acts 13:10), and it is by the Spirit of Christ that one is circumcised not in the flesh but in the heart (Rom. 2:29).

What strikes one about the report from Ibn Sa’d’s collection, several versions of which are given, is its newness. The Qur’ān does not clearly speak of the prophet as remaking the human condition. While referring to the blind, the deaf, and those whose hearts are uncircumcised, it does not describe the prophet as healing them. Moreover, while referring to those who seek to make the way of God crooked (e.g., Q 7:86), it does not describe the prophet as remaking a human condition so beset by perversities that it would seek to make the way of God crooked. In short, according to the Qur’ān, he is not the new Adam. Why does the above report speak of him as remaking the human condition when the Qur’ān does not clearly do so?

It might be thought that the report from Ibn Sa’d’s collection is simply a response to Christian claims of the prophet as a mere mortal with no divine agency to bring about new life. This is not the place to go into all the historical details, but a better explanation, I believe, is that scholars such as Ibn Sa’d had become aware that the governing structures that were meant to preserve the order of Islam had become hopelessly compromised by the world. The law alone, it had become clear, was not enough to make Muslims righteous. Hearts needed to be remade. The Qur’ān refers to the prophet’s elevated stature, but the circumstances of the day made it necessary to present the prophet as the fulfillment of human character. His character in this sense, divinely enhanced, as it were, would come to be known as noble character (*makārim al-aḥlāq*).⁸ Significantly, scholars in Ibn Sa’d’s circles looked to “the wisdom” (*al-ḥikma*), understood as scripture prior to Islam,⁹ for insight into this divine remaking of human ethics.

The idea of the prophet as the fulfillment of human character is detailed in the section of Ibn Sa’d’s collection on “The Description of the Character of the Messenger of God”.¹⁰ (Given what was just mentioned about reliance on “the wisdom” for

⁸ The first independent work with this title was composed by Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 894), who studied with Ibn Sa’d.

⁹ See, for example, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, Muḥammad Ḡalāl Šaraf (ed.), Dār al-Nahḍa al-‘Arabiyya, Beirut 1981, 153-154. Needless to say, the idea of “wisdom” as scripture prior to Islam was only one way in which the concept was understood in Islam. As early as the ninth century, it became identified with philosophy (*falsafa*).

¹⁰ Ibn Sa’d, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, vol. 1, 313-321.

insight into the divine remaking of human ethics, it is no coincidence that this section follows immediately upon the one on the prophet's description in the Torah and Gospel where the above report appears.) The image of the prophet that emerges amidst this section's many reports is that of a figure of incomparable character – a paragon of kindness. Emphasis is given to his character, first, as being the character of the Qur'ān, signaling that it has been divinely enhanced, and, second, as the best of human character (*aḥsan aḥlāq al-nās*), that is, as its fulfillment. Confirming this is a report in which the prophet states that the best people are the most ethical, that is, the most righteous, after his model. The section, overall, suggests a felt need to highlight the prophet as a new creation. Significantly, its reports recall both Qur'ānic verses and “the wisdom” in that regard. For example, the prophet is emphatically described as soft-hearted, recalling Q 3:159, which attributes his leniency to a mercy from God. At the same time, he is depicted as the most patient of people in bearing the burdens of the people (*aṣḥab al-nās 'ala awzār al-nās*), a phrase that recalls Galatians 6:2, where the Law of Christ is fulfilled by bearing the burdens of others.¹¹

In sum, in the face of the disappointing conditions in the domain of Islam, Muslims as early as the ninth century began to present the prophet as a new creation that others, too, could become. These divinely remade figures, the righteous who demonstrated that God had not abandoned the umma, were known as “indicants of divine mercy” (*dalā'il al-raḥma*).¹² Significantly, while the idea of humans taking on the divine characteristic of mercy is not quite absent from the Qur'ān,¹³ Muslims of the period turned to material of a biblical provenance to clarify the point.

Ibn Abī al-Dunyā – Remade by the Compunction at Play in Pious Weeping

We now turn to Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 894), who, despite associations with the caliphal court, played a considerable role in the formation of a distinct culture of *zuhd* in Islam.¹⁴ This term, commonly translated as asceticism or world-renunciation, includes a kind of spiritual discernment by which one seeks to establish whether one's

¹¹ The translation into Arabic of “burdens” at Galatians 6:2 has long been *awzār*. The possibility that this particular report in Ibn Sa'd's collection has even a loose connection to Paul's letter is strengthened by the Qur'ānic insistence that one does not bear another's burden (*w-z-r*), e.g., Q 6:164. The Qur'ānic verse likely refers to acts of disobedience (or sin/guilt in general), as Muslims have interpreted it, so the fact that the term has another meaning in the report in Ibn Sa'd's collection (one that recalls its usage at Galatians 6:2) requires explanation.

¹² See, for example, al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Waṣāyā aw al-Naṣā'ih al-dīniyya wa-l-naḥāḥāt al-qudsiyya*, 'Abd al-Qādir Aḥmad 'Aṭā (ed.), Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, Beirut 2003, 40.

¹³ See Q 48:29, where being merciful seems limited to fellow followers of the Messenger of God.

¹⁴ See, in general, C. Melchert, *Before Sufism: Early Islamic Renunciant Piety*, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2020.

inner life (*sarīra*) is wholly oriented to the next world, as it should be, or remains even slightly attached to the things of this world, putting one at risk of being cast into hell-fire on Judgment Day for lack of a total devotion to God.

Ibn Abī al-Dunyā compiled numerous collections of reports on a host of pious topics, many of which have reached us.¹⁵ Significantly, his collections indicate that the contours of *zuhd* took shape in conversation with the monastic culture of Eastern Christianity.¹⁶ The call of the Qurʾān to Judgment Day in the next world is quite clear in the main, but it seems that pious Muslims looked to monastic wisdom for a more precise understanding of the ways of *zuhd*.

We can see traces of this conversation in Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's work on pious weeping (*Sensitivity of the Heart and Weeping*).¹⁷ The heritage of pious weeping in Islam is vast and awaits fuller analysis. It is possible to speak of two general categories. One is lament for lost glory – such as the destruction of one's city, the demise of the caliphate, or the death of fellow warriors. The other, in which Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's work can be located, is lament for sin. Weeping as we consider it here in relation to his work is a kind of pious emotionality that is penitential but also quasi-redemptive. Specifically, the tears of the righteous that Ibn Abī al-Dunyā treats in his work not only attract divine mercy. They also transfer it to others. In short, the emotionality is shared, and because it is shared, the spirit that accompanies the emotionality – here, divine mercy – can be transferred in a quasi-redemptive fashion from the one piously weeping to others who may or may not weep but are still affected by the weeping.¹⁸

Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's collection of reports on weeping is quite large. Here, I must

¹⁵ His corpus of writings stands in need of fuller analysis. Of the handful of studies in the western academy, see L. Librande, "Ibn Abī l-Dunyā: Certainty and Morality", *Studia Islamica* 100/101 (2005) 5-42. Librande is also the author of the entry, "Ibn Abī l-Dunyā", in the third and most recent edition of *Encyclopaedia Islamica*.

¹⁶ See B. Bowman, *Christian Monastic Life in Early Islam* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2021), a far-ranging treatment of Muslim engagement with monastic culture, including analysis of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's work on monks (*Kitāb al-Ruhbān*). In Islam, the term for monks is not limited to Christians. Occasional reports speak of the monks of the Israelites, recalling Q 2:40, where the Israelites are called to fear God. The term for "fear" shares the same root as the word for monk (*r-h-b*). This Qurʾānic verse continues to inform Muslim views of "monks".

¹⁷ Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Kitāb al-Riqqa wa-l-bukāʾ*, Muḥammad Ḥayr Ramaḍān Yūsuf (ed.), 3rd ed., Dār Ibn Ḥazm, Beirut 1998. There are very few studies on pious weeping in Islam. To cite only two relatively recent ones: L. G. Jones, "'He Cried and Made Others Cry': Crying as a Sign of Pietistic Authenticity or Deception in Medieval Islamic Preaching", in E. Gertsman (ed.), *Crying in the Middle Ages: Tears of History*, Routledge, London 2012, 102-135; and W. Chittick, "Weeping in Classical Sufism", in K. C. Patton, J. S. Hawley (eds.), *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 2005, 132-144.

¹⁸ We have partly lost appreciation of the idea of shared emotionality and the devotional purpose it serves. For a bit of the history behind this loss, see J. F. van Dijkhuizen, "Early Modern Religious Discourses of Pain" = chapter two in *Pain and Compassion in Early Modern English Literature and Culture*, D. S. Brewer, Cambridge 2012, 31-88.

limit my reflection to a pair of observations to illustrate his understanding of holy tears. First, several reports indicate that weeping in reverence of God (*ḥaṣyat Allāh*) not only leaves one with a tangible sense of divine mercy as assurance that one's sins have been forgiven. It also grafts one into divine life of a kind, described as God's light and signaled by one's weeping being changed to laughter.¹⁹ Second, several reports speak of pious weeping as a blessing that impacts all who witness it. Their sins are also forgiven.²⁰ That is, if the weeping is true, it causes others to repent.

The collection as a whole aligns with the nature of weeping in Eastern Christianity in at least two respects.²¹ The first is the way in which the weeping connects one to the heavenly realm. In other words, one is not simply weeping to mitigate God's wrath at one's sins. One's weeping serves as a forum of divine-human ethics transference, specifically, of the introduction of divine mercy into the body of the weeper such that it be remade. Weeping, then, is not simply a sign of sincere remorse. It is meant to be a bodily witness to divine mercy at work in one's inner life. It is in this way that the fruits of pious weeping can be seen – witnessed – by others and thus transferred to them, working for the ethical regeneration of the community as a whole.

The second aspect of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's collection that aligns with Eastern Christianity is the way in which pious weeping is religiously authorizing when, as just noted, it embodies and thus witnesses to the presence of divine mercy at work in one's inner life. Indeed, as several reports suggest, spiritually sensitive figures, whose tears the community judges to be the fruit of contrition and not just theatrics, possess a higher authority, that of divine mercy, which can at crucial moments trump the authority of rulers and judges, which, after all, is a worldly authority.

It is also worth noting that King David is the model par excellence of pious weeping in Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's collection.²² He is, of course, weeping for his sin against Uriah the Hittite.²³ The group of reports that describe the nature of his weeping shows it to be a process of being remade – bodily – by divine mercy. One report speaks of his joints coming undone as a result of his weeping – and then being put back together by divine mercy.²⁴ In other words, he is not just forgiven his sin. He has become a new creation, his tears grafting him into life in God's light.

The prominence of King David as a model of pious weeping is noteworthy for our purposes because the Psalms of David featured prominently in liturgical hymns in

¹⁹ Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Kitāb al-Riqqa wa-l-bukā'*, 45 (report 8). The idea of tears being changed to laughter is, of course, biblical (e.g., Ps. 126:6 and Luke 6:21). Indeed, the idea contains a distinctly redemptive sense.

²⁰ Ibid., 52 (report 28).

²¹ For weeping in Eastern Christianity, see K. C. Patton, "Howl, Weep and Moan, and Bring It Back to God": Holy Tears in Eastern Christianity", in Patton, Hawley (eds.), *Holy Tears*, 255-273.

²² Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Kitāb al-Riqqa wa-l-bukā'*, 235-259.

²³ The story does appear in the Qur'ān at 38:21-26 without, however, mentioning Uriah by name.

²⁴ Ibid., 246 (report 360).

Eastern Christianity that were meant to encourage the kind of pious weeping at play in Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's collection.²⁵ The fact that the early Muslim understanding of pious weeping took shape in conversation with perspectives from Eastern Christianity is most clearly noticeable in the idea of compunction, a spiritual movement experienced as a burning or a stinging by which one knows that one's contrition has taken root in the soul, that is, that divine mercy has taken the place of one's remorse and is working to remake one's being in that sense. The term in Greek for compunction is *katanyxis*, which features in the liturgical hymns of Eastern Christianity, as mentioned above, where it was related to pious weeping through the lens of longstanding reflection on the biblical heritage, including, for example, the description of the spiritual effect that Peter's words had on the hearts of his listeners at Pentecost (Acts 2:37) and the broken spirit and contrite heart that David offered to God as his burnt offering to God (Ps. 51:16-17).²⁶

The term for compunction that is used in several reports in Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's collection is *hurqa* ("a burning"). In these reports, it has a bodily manifestation. When David sighs for his sins, he shakes and is burnt. The physical nature of the experience is signaled by the fact that the grass around him is also burnt up.²⁷ Another report describes compunction as the ultimate cause of pious weeping in terms that are both spiritual and medical: "The eye is not moistened until the heart burns, and when the heart burns, its flame blazes, and the smoke rises to the head, making tears descend from the eye ducts to the eye, which then flows with tears."²⁸ The very next report confirms that pious weeping, if true, is not something one can control. It is entirely due to the degree of compunction in the heart. If particularly intense, one will weep against one's will without the need for pious exhortation.²⁹ Noteworthy is one report that suggests that those who witness the weeper can sense whether the tears are prompted by compunction or not.³⁰ If they are not actually tears of contrition, only a show of piety, people will not be ethically moved by them.

²⁵ See A. Melas, *Liturgy and Emotions in Byzantium: Compunction and Hymnody*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 2020, especially 7. See also J. S. Arlen, "'Let Us Mourn Continuously': John Chrysostom and the Early Christian Transformation of Mourning", *Studia Patristica* 83 (2017) 289-312, especially footnotes 70 and 78.

²⁶ On *katanyxis* in Eastern Christianity, see M. Hinterberger, "'Messages of the Soul': Tears, Smiles, Laughter and Emotions Expressed in Byzantine Literature", in M. Alexiou, D. L. Cairns (eds.), *Greek Laughter and Tears: Antiquity and After*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2017, 125-145. For more on weeping in Eastern Christianity, see B. Müller, *Der Weg des Weinens: Die Tradition des „Penthos“ in den Apophthegmata Patrum*, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen 2000; H. Hunt, *Joy-bearing Grief: Tears of Contrition in the Writings of the Early Syrian and Byzantine Fathers*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2004; and J. Chryssavgis, "A Spirituality of Imperfection: The Way of Tears in Saint John Climacus", *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 37 (2002) 359-371.

²⁷ Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Kitāb al-Riqqa wa-l-bukā'*, 243 (report 351).

²⁸ Ibid., 76 (report 68).

²⁹ Ibid., 76 (report 69).

³⁰ Ibid., 202 (report 281).

The term *ḥurqa* appears in secular poetry as evidence of one's longing for one's human beloved.³¹ In the context of pious weeping, it also conveys the sense of longing – burning – for one's beloved, who is now the divine beloved. Despite the presence of the term in other literature in the language of the Arabs, the particular nuance it is given in the reports of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's collection is difficult to explain without reference to the idea of compunction in Eastern Christianity. This is not to suggest a one-way causal influence from Eastern Christianity to Islam but a shared cultural milieu in which members of the two traditions recognized that they had enough in common that they could allow themselves to be spiritually edified by one another.³²

Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's collection on pious weeping indicates that Muslims looked to Eastern Christianity for insight into the workings of divine mercy in the soul, particularly the way in which pious weeping introduced a divine gesture into the soul – mercy – by which one's being was opened to a divine remaking. While it could be said that the idea of holy tears as possessed of redemptive agency is distinctly if not exclusively Christian, we need to be careful in understanding how the idea becomes part of other traditions. It would be wrong to think of Islam as wholly different – or separable – from Christianity at any period in its history. In this sense, we can say that Muslims saw in the idea of compunction – as they noticed it in monastic culture – a way to explain their own experience of pious weeping, which is mentioned in a number of verses in the Qur'ān apparently in relation to Judgment Day without, however, explaining it as a site of divine mercy. Thus, for a fuller knowledge of the ways of divine mercy as they already knew it, Muslims looked to Eastern Christianity. By Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's day, monastic wisdom on weeping would have been incorporated into the language of the Arabs. His work on the topic underscores a common Christian-Muslim spiritual heritage around holy tears.³³

³¹ For example, see al-Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabā' wa-muḥāwarāt al-ṣu'arā' wa-l-bulagā'*, 3 vols., Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, Beirut 1961, vol. 2, 84.

³² One report from another collection by Ibn Abī al-Dunyā—*The Book of Monks*—seems to confirm a sense of common spiritual purpose in relation to *ḥurqa*. The report in question is narrated by a figure by the name of 'Abd Rabbihi al-Ābid, who relates that he asked one of the monks about the reason they wore black. The monk responds that black is the height of contrition (*ḥurqa*) by which is implied a kind of death to this world. The report strongly suggests that Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's circles understood *ḥurqa* in a way that overlapped with monastic culture. For the collection along with translation, see B. Bowman, "Refuge in the Bosoms of the Mountains: A Ninth-Century Appraisal of Monastic Piety", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 30 (2019) 459-482. The report in question is number 17. Bowman translates *ḥurqa* (incorrectly in view of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's collection on weeping) as "agony".

³³ There is great need for research that sheds further light on this common Christian-Muslim sentiment through the classical period of Islam, when major collections on pious weeping were compiled, to our own contemporary moment, when all kinds of discussions—and instances—of pious weeping can be found on YouTube.

Al-Ġazālī – A Higher Order of Being

We turn next to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī (d. 1111), one of Islam's most celebrated scholars. His magnum opus, *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences*, grounds the ethics of Islam in "the science of the otherworld" (*ilm al-āḥira*). Motivated by a sense that the religious scholars of his day, especially those employed in governmental administration, had become compromised by the worldly nature of their work, al-Ġazālī composed many of his works with the aim of orienting these scholars to a higher order of being, imbuing their ethics with a distinctly otherworldly orientation to counter the way their vocation left them oriented to this world.

The writings of al-Ġazālī weave together the philosophical and the theological with the ethical and the legal. Our interest is limited to a report that appears in the fourth and final quarter of his magnum opus in a section on "Love, Longing, Intimacy, and Contentment",³⁴ as follows:

It is narrated that Jesus, peace be upon him, passed by a man blind, leprous, crippled, and paralyzed on both sides. His flesh was falling off from the leprosy, but he was still saying, 'Praise be to God who has spared me from the tribulations that He has afflicted on many others.' Jesus said to him, 'What tribulation has been diverted from you?' He said, 'O Spirit of God, I'm in a better state than those in whose hearts God has not placed the awareness of His presence that He has placed in mine.' Jesus said, 'You've spoken truly. Give me your hand.' He gave him his hand and then turned into the person with the most beautiful face and the best form. God put away from him his afflictions, and he became the companion of Jesus, peace be upon him, and devoted himself to God with him.³⁵

First of all, it needs to be emphasized that al-Ġazālī includes this report because it speaks to a spiritual state where the veil between the creator and the creature has been lifted already in this world. The man in the above report is not waiting for a heavenly reward as compensation for his wretched state on earth. He is satisfied and sustained by his awareness of God in this world irrespective of his state. In other words, we first need to read the report within al-Ġazālī's overall vision that weds together the plain teachings of Islam for the commoners and a higher vision, philosophically and mystically compelling, for the spiritual elite. Commoners who carry out their duties with no awareness of the divine presence in their midst deserve deliverance (*naḡāt*) from hellfire. That is, they deserve paradise. However, there is a higher state that comes with awareness of being in God's presence. Evidence of this state is the contentment (*riḍā*) that one takes in one's divinely apportioned lot. Such evidence is particularly strong when one's lot is wretched as in the case of the man in the above report. Indeed, how might one not become dissatisfied with God for being apportioned

³⁴ *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥālidī (ed.), 5 vols., Dār al-Arqam b. Abī al-Arqam, Beirut 1998, vol. 4., 375-456.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 447.

such a wretched lot in life if one were not sustained by a sense of God's presence? However, things don't end with the creature, sustained by God's presence, taking contentment in God's allotment (*qaḍā'*) for it. God responds to this contentment of the creature in God by taking contentment in it. The result, as al-Ġazālī explains in this section of his magnum opus, is a relation of mutual love between the creator and creature, each taking contentment in the other, with transformative effect on the inner life of the creature.

What interests us in this report is the role of Jesus. While al-Ġazālī makes his point in this section with other reports of a similar kind that do not include Jesus, this report is striking because it seems to diverge a bit from Islam's view of Jesus. In this report, Jesus does not so much physically heal the man as confirm and even mediate a transformation in his being – his human reality. The Qur'ān speaks of Jesus as physically healing the blind and leprous and as physically raising the dead (Q 3:49), but those actions are miracles of attestation, proofs of his status as a messenger from God. In other words, the above report, which conveys a sense not only of a physical healing but also of a transformation in being, goes beyond – even while recalling – the Qur'ānic text. There is a distinctly if not exclusively Christian tone to the idea that humans might be transformed – remade as a new creation – by knowing God's spiritual sustenance of them and contentment in – love for – them amidst a wretchedness that would lead many to despair of God. One can't help but wonder whether the report has origins in Eastern Christianity where it might have been used as a vivid illustration of the meaning of the Eucharist.

However, while the report recalls the redemptive agency of Jesus as understood in Christian terms (that is, as a remaking of the human condition in the image of divine glory), it remains within the theological boundaries of Islam where Jesus is known to alleviate suffering but does not undergo suffering. This is arguably the core difference between the two traditions. In Islam, Jesus is the servant of God, while in Christianity, Jesus is the suffering servant of God. Why is the nature of Jesus's servanthood so important? In short, it is only as suffering servant that Jesus's status as Son of God makes sense in the context of Christian-Muslim encounter.³⁶

Qur'ān 19:30-36 presents Jesus as speaking of himself as the servant of God, entrusted with scripture, a prophet, blessed (*mubārak*) by God, and commanded to pray,

³⁶ To be sure, the Jewish tradition has conceived of Son of God in ways that do not clearly include suffering. One sees this in the Psalms, where, in contrast to the Servant of God in Second Isaiah (which informed the Christian understanding of Jesus), Son of God is not associated with redemptive suffering. Indeed, both Jewish and Christian traditions, even if the latter decisively emphasizes the aspect of redemptive suffering, would understand Son of God in terms of the revelation/incarnation of divine wisdom. See, for example, J. D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Incarnation*, Westminster Press: Philadelphia PA 1986. Arguably, the idea of the suffering servant is tied to the understanding of the prophetic body as the post-exilic site of the temple sacrifice (e.g., Ezek. 4:4-8).

give material support to God's cause, and honor his mother. He asks God that he always know peace from the day of his birth to the day he dies and is resurrected. The comment is then made that it is not for God to have a son (*walad*). Noteworthy is the connection between Jesus's insistence that he is but the servant of God and the subsequent claim that Jesus is not the Son of God. In other words, he is simply the servant of God, not the *suffering* servant of God, and is therefore not the Son of God.

In contrast, the narrations of the Gospel underscore the fact that Jesus is the suffering servant of God (Mark 10:45 and Matt. 12:18) as foretold by scripture (e.g., Isa. 53:11). It is precisely in the suffering aspect of Jesus's servanthood that his redemptive agency lies – and therefore his status as the Son of God.³⁷ According to Christianity, in contrast to the report in al-Ġazālī's work, Jesus's role is not limited to that of confirming or even mediating a transformation in the being of those who take contentment in God's decree. According to Christianity, the redemptive agency of Jesus implies that he is the bearer of divine power to offset – overcome – the reign of sin. It is in this sense that Jesus is the Son of God (and not in any biological sense as Muslims often assume). In turn, those who partake in – and thereby become incorporated into – the body of Christ are children of God by association; they share in – have access to – the divine power of Jesus to offset/overcome the reign of sin. That is, Jesus's redemptive sacrifice transforms our sinful state, remaking it in that sense, a process that continues so long as the Spirit of Christ is sovereign over our lives. In sum, Jesus's redemptive agency has to do with sin above all, and this agency goes beyond alleviating the suffering of others. It involves Jesus's suffering. His suffering is redemptive because it offsets/overcomes sin. He is, then, the bearer of the divine power by which the power of sin is offset/overcome. He is, then, the Son of God. In Islam, his role, as with the prophets generally, is to confirm and even mediate righteousness. It is not to offset/overcome sin.

The status of Jesus as the Son of God in the sense just described is due in no small part to his association with the Temple of God. (This association is absent in Islam.) The body of Christ is the Temple of God and thus the site where God's covenantal love is poured out onto the world. It is by this divine love that humanity is redeemed and sin offset/overcome. In other words, Jesus is God's Son because he is God's Temple. The link is made at Matthew 26:59-63 where the two terms exist in parallel. In turn, those who partake in the body of Christ are also temples of the Holy Spirit – witnesses to the glory of the Lord in their own bodies (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

Christians and Muslims share a felt need for divine assistance – a blessing – to be able to live righteously as God commands. However, Muslims do not recognize any person as the bearer of divine power to offset/overcome sin, not even the Prophet

³⁷ I'm not suggesting that Jesus only became the Son of God as a result of (or following) his suffering. However, the narrations of the Gospel suggest that humans only fully comprehended his status as the Son of God in light of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

Muhammad.³⁸ Muslims have long chanted hymns in praise of him with language that is quasi-redemptive.³⁹ However, his role is limited to that of intercessor. He intercedes for his community as its advocate, confirming its devotion to God despite its shortcomings. On Judgment Day, one's soul, it is hoped, will be accepted by God, despite offenses one has committed, through the intercession of Muhammad on account of which God overlooks sin even if not quite remaking a sinful humanity. Muhammad thus protects and delivers his community from hellfire by interceding for it, but he is not the bearer of divine power over sin. He confirms that one has been forgiven, but he does not have the power to forgive. This role is detailed in the work of a seventeenth-century scholar from Fez in Morocco, Muḥammad al-Mahdī (d. 1689), on the titles of the Prophet Muhammad, among them "the deliverer" (*al-munaḡḡī*).⁴⁰ This title, it is explained, applies to him in both this world and the next. In this world, he delivered his followers from the violent ways they had known as infidels. In the next, he will deliver them from hellfire by two means. The first is his presence with them that will never fail to ward off God's wrath. His presence in this sense, while limited to his time on earth, will have effect again on Judgment Day. The second pertains to the time when he is no longer with them. It is a prayer formula that he has left with them and that they can use to seek divine forgiveness (*istiḡfār*). By reciting this invocation, effective because of its prophetic origin, those who belong to the community of Muhammad can be confident of being forgiven by God.

Despite this role of the Prophet Muhammad as accrediting (*tazkīya*) his community before God, interceding for it in that sense, being a blessing for it not only as the model of righteousness to emulate but also by advocating for it on Judgment Day, he is nevertheless not the bearer of divine power to offset/overcome sin in the sense described above. This point was explained to me on more than one occasion in conversation with Muslims in Morocco, who base their view on a hadith in which the prophet likens

³⁸ Even God in Islam does not quite offset/overcome sin, since doing so would imply a re-making (redeeming) of a sinful humanity. This redemptive scenario is not quite present in Islam's religious outlook. Rather, God forgives sin, it would seem, by overlooking it. In Islam, God is ceaselessly forgiving (this attribute going closely together with another one, God as merciful). The process of forgiveness is one where God covers over (*yukaḡfir* or *yastur*) human acts of disobedience/sin. In addition, good deeds that Muslims undertake can compensate for bad ones. (Different terms are used, such as *maḡhū*, "to erase".) However, such "covering over" or "compensating for" is not described as a recreating of the human condition, even if Muslims might actually experience it as such. In other words, while sin has been covered over, it is not clear that it has been defeated. (It's been "hidden", but it's still there, as it were.) Of course, the distinction is partly attributable to the different ways Christians and Muslim conceive of sin.

³⁹ Examples can be found in A. Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1985.

⁴⁰ The book is titled *Maṭāli' al-masarrāt bi-ḡalā' dalā'il al-ḡayrāt*. In other words, it is a commentary of a kind on the famous collection of prayers of praise for the Prophet Muhammad (*Dalā'il al-ḡayrāt*) by Imām al-Ġazūlī (d. 1465).

himself to a man who seeks to prevent moths from flying into a fire but is unable to do so. The fire, commentators explain, symbolizes sin – disobedience against God. Despite the prophet's best efforts, people persist in acts of disobedience just as moths fly into fire. Thus, while he can intercede for their sins on Judgment Day, he has no actual power over sin. He acts to accredit people's repentance, their good standing with God, when they turn from false deities, accept his message, and join his community, but he does not offer them the divine power by which to become a new creation. Thus, traditionally, he is the deliverer but not the redeemer. He was persecuted for conveying the message of God. He suffered for the cause of God, but his suffering was not redemptive. It showed his extraordinary devotion to God, but it did not show God's great love for the world.

It would be wrong to exaggerate differences in the religious aims and even experiences of Christians and Muslims. The preceding discussion was meant to help us better understand the report from al-Ġazālī. At first glance, it would be easy to conflate its depiction of Jesus with the Christian one, and that is the point worth stressing, despite all the theological distinctions. Muslims feel renewed, even remade, as a result of their religious practices. Noteworthy is the fact that they have turned to material of a distinctly if not exclusively Christian tone to describe this sense of being remade. We saw this with Ibn Sa'd and Ibn Abī al-Dunyā and now we see it with al-Ġazālī. The report of Jesus that he narrates, even if not conveying the Christian message, has a strongly redemptive flavor. In that respect, it goes beyond the Qur'ānic depiction of Jesus. Thus, even if respecting Islam's theological boundaries, it raises questions of origin – and of meaning.

It is no secret that stories of Christian origin were adopted by Muslims.⁴¹ The report from al-Ġazālī's work, even if its origin has not been established (as far as I know), easily blends, as noted above, with Christian sentiment around the person of Jesus. Thus, while al-Ġazālī used the report for his own purposes, it can still be asked why such a report had taken hold among Muslims, making it possible for him to use it. Another report from another work can shed a bit of light on the matter. It comes from the celebrated tale of the visionary poet, 'Aṭṭār (d. early thirteenth), entitled *Converse of the Birds* (*Manṭiq al-ṭayr*). This mystical epic relates the drama of human souls – allegorized as birds – as they journey to unity with God. In one story, a poor man is depicted as gathering thorns to sell as fire brush.⁴² The king of the world, out

⁴¹ See, for example, S. A. Mourad, "Christian Monks in Islamic Literature: A Preliminary Report on Some Arabic *Apophthegmata Patrum*", *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 6 (2004) 81-98.

⁴² The story is at verses 1708-1735. Several online versions are available. I cite and translate two verses (1734-5):

نهاد تا چو اویی دست بر خارم نهاد. گرچه خاری است کارزان ارزد اینچون ز دست اوست صد جان ارزد این.
نا مرادی خار بسیارم

"Disappointment pricked me with many a thorn until one like him touched my thorns with his hand. // Although they're thorns, worth little, [however,] since they're from his hand, they are worth lives by the hundreds."

hunting, comes across him and proceeds to help him, but the poor man doesn't recognize him. Only later, when he learns the truth, does he comprehend the new value that his thorns now have, touched by a royal hand.

The story is allegorical. The king is God; the thorns are our human wounds, which, once touched by God, take on new value. A human regeneration occurs, the result of the presence of divine mercy amidst our wretchedness. 'Aṭṭār, like al-Ġazālī, is challenging assumptions around the workings of divine mercy that would limit it to a heavenly reward for obedience. Both advance the idea that divine mercy is more fully understood as transformative especially in light of the reality of human suffering. In 'Aṭṭār, the reality of the thorny baggage that we all bear is transformed when touched by the hand of divine mercy. In al-Ġazālī, the hand that initiates transformation amidst human wretchedness is that of Jesus. Why did Muslims draw on concepts with a strongly Christian tone to describe their own experiences of being transformed by God?

Badr Šākir al-Sayyāb – The Cross as Threshold into New Life

We end our survey with a brief word on the 1957 poem of Badr Šākir al-Sayyāb (1926-1964), "Christ after the Crucifixion" (*al-Masīḥ ba'd al-ṣalḥ*).⁴³ A pioneering poet from Iraq who continues to be celebrated by readers of Arabic literature, al-Sayyāb was not a Christian, and yet his most famous poem focuses on the Crucifixion. Muslims, it is well known, revere Jesus as a prophet but reject the idea that God would have allowed him to suffer such a humiliating defeat on the Cross. They claim – on the basis of Q 4:157 – that someone who resembled Jesus was crucified in his place, while God raised Jesus to Himself, unharmed in body and unbowed in spirit, to return and die only at the end of time. Despite this belief, al-Sayyāb took on the role of Christ on the Cross in his poem. In doing so, he sought to awaken his people to new life – resurrection – within the circumstances of their own society, but since there is no resurrection without death, al-Sayyāb was led to make use of the Christian version of the story of Christ.

At the same time, the poem refers to the myth of Tammuz, a deity of the Ancient Near East who is ritually killed and brought back to life every year. Thus, even if al-Sayyāb dramatically represents the heart of the Christian message by drawing upon the Christ of the Gospel rather than the Christ of the Qur'ān, he still guards the truth of Islam by including a reference that would signal for Muslims what they often regard as Christianity's pagan aspect. This aspect of the poem raises a question about Muslim approaches to Christianity. As we have seen, Muslims have engaged the heart of the Christian message for centuries and yet miss – or dismiss – its unique notion of grace, the Spirit of Christ, poured forth to renew all of creation.⁴⁴ Shorn of its unique

⁴³ The poem is widely available on the internet.

⁴⁴ Of course, Muslims often feel that Christians easily overlook the goodness of Islam and even dismiss it as incapable of adjusting to modern life as if Christianity alone has the right to claim the mantle of human civilization.

notion of grace, the Cross as understood by Christians sounds to many Muslims like the story of a pagan deity's cyclical death-and-resurrection. Nevertheless, what needs to be emphasized is the fact that "Christ after the Crucifixion", like the above writings, is related to a Christian source. The poem of al-Sayyāb was partly inspired by his reading of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922), which, despite its complex meanings, has a biblical echo in its anticipation of new life amidst the brokenness of the human condition. Thus, like many Muslims before him, al-Sayyāb was willing to listen to and engage the biblical message as it echoed in the writings of Christians, even while also making sure to guard the theological boundaries of Islam.

Concluding Remarks

This survey shows that Muslims have actually "listened" to Christian expressions of being remade for perspective on their own experiences of and insights into the workings of divine mercy. Without suggesting one community is morally superior, I will draw some conclusions on the import of this history, illustrated by the above examples, for Christian theological self-understanding. In short, the above examples confirm that other religions can be understood – as they are and have been lived – in terms of church teaching as *praeparatio evangelica*.⁴⁵ Islam, in our case, has what Christians can recognize as a religious integrity of its own on account of its capacity to be in relation with the Kingdom of God as proclaimed by the church. This capacity, as seen above, lies specifically in the preparedness of Muslims to look to Christian expressions of being remade for perspective on their own experiences of and insights into the workings of divine mercy. Thus, while the Christianity of the Qur'ān is not what the church proclaims, the foregoing suggests that Muslims are not separate from the Kingdom of God, which, the church teaches, is not coterminous with the church but is not fully known without it. Our survey thus offers data for seeing the doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* as referring to the church not apart from the world, as if a territorially limited entity, but in relation to the world. In this sense, we see the world in relation to the church, that is, in a global sense where the world is a common religious space in which the church is in a spiritually active and fruitful relation with other communities to the benefit of all, not the "triumph" of one.⁴⁶ Our survey therefore points to church teaching that Islam has gifts from God by which to know and be

⁴⁵ This concept need not be restricted to a chronological sense, that is, the witness of the Hebrew Bible as preparing the way for the Gospel. It can therefore be applied to Islam even if arising after the announcement of the Gospel. See G. D'Costa, *Vatican II. Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, 61.

⁴⁶ For a useful reflection on the history of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, see D. A. Madigan, D. R. Sarrió Cucarella, "Thinking Outside the Box: Developments in Catholic Understandings of Salvation", in R. McKim (ed.), *Religious Perspectives on Religious Diversity*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2017, 63-119.

remade by God's mercy even if the church remains the bearer of the good news and witness to the Kingdom of God to which other traditions, especially Islam, are also ordered (*ordinari*).

What we are proposing might seem theologically arrogant, namely, that the church mediates the fullness of the covenant by which God's love is known through the manifestation of divine glory in a humanity recreated by God's mercy. However, this mediation, as illustrated in the above examples, involves a relation to other traditions on their own terms. Indeed, the above examples confirm that the order of salvation is one, that Islam is part of it on its own terms (experiencing divine mercy as a transformation), and, at the same time, that this order is inseparable from the Christian notion of grace by which humanity is remade. The idea of the church as mediating the fullness of the covenant is not a judgment on other traditions. Rather, it is the key Christian takeaway when, here, it comes to Christian-Muslim theological engagement.

Let me conclude by stating three points – at least as far as this article is concerned – regarding the key Christian takeaways when it comes to Christian-Muslim theological engagement. First, such engagement makes it clear that Christians and Muslims are deeply attracted to divine mercy and to knowledge of its workings. Divine mercy is, then, the common religious space in which Christians and Muslims are meant to encounter one another and – through that encounter – to learn more of God's desire to remake the human condition by God's mercy. Christian-Muslim theological engagement thus works to identify the nature and purpose of Christian-Muslim relations. Amidst our differences, Christians and Muslims can jointly affirm that it is only by the help of God's mercy that we can live righteously, that is, for God, and it is in light of this common knowledge of God's mercy that we are duly impelled to undertake works of mercy together, that is, as a shared witness to the world of the workings of divine mercy.⁴⁷

Second, Christian-Muslim theological engagement is theologically affirming for the message and mission of the church because it discloses the spiritual sentiment that the two traditions share around divine mercy even (perhaps especially) when such sentiment is diversely packaged theologically. In other words, the theological diversity is not a problem to overcome or resolve. It actually has theological purpose, specifying the nature of the message and the mission of the church in the world. There is important value for Christians when Muslims, as we have seen in the foregoing, “play back” the heart of the Christian message as they have heard it from Christians even if (perhaps especially when) they have rewoven it into the theological fabric of their religiosity, Islam, for the sake of clarifying their own spiritual experiences and insights.

Third, in this sense, Christian theological engagement with Islam is not meant to take place without richer insight into the message and mission of the church. To be

⁴⁷ This point is arguably the main idea of the joint Christian-Muslim “Document on Human Fraternity” (2019).

sure, Christians have long been religiously edified by the religious devotion of Muslims. Such is one conclusion that can be drawn from the growth in Christian writings on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations as surveyed by Marshall. The growth in such writings seems to follow a growth in Christian appreciation of Muslims as sharers in – rather than as foreigners to – the Christian message and mission. Nevertheless, the two traditions are not meant to dissolve into one another. Our survey recalls the role of the church as the universal sacrament of salvation, which is the image of the church that is most frequently used in Catholic teaching on the church's relation with other religions.⁴⁸ The above examples suggest that the image is rightly used in that sense. Two points can be made in this regard. First, salvation – the remaking of the human condition – by God's mercy takes place in Islam. Second, the church's message, that we are meant to be recreated by divine mercy, has offered Muslims a horizon in which to realize more fully their experiences of divine mercy as it has been revealed to them. The children of Abraham through Ishmael may not understand the covenant as Christians do, namely, as a process of being remade by God's love.⁴⁹ However, Muslims do feel renewed, even remade, as a result of the divine mercy that they experience through their own religious practices, and yet the idea of being recreated by God in this world implies that one has been remade as a child of God, that is, by God's love. Such is a theological impossibility in Islam. For this reason, Muslims have been listening to Christians over the centuries when it comes to the workings of divine mercy, especially the idea of being remade by it, since it makes sense of their religious experience, even if they balk at what such language implies about the fatherhood of God. All this, then, affirms, as scripture indicates (Gen. 17:20-21), the blessings – the gifts – that God has given to the children of Abraham through Ishmael and, at the same time, the unique role of the church, not simply as the universal bearer of the good news of being remade

⁴⁸ For example, in several documents from Vatican II, including *Ad Gentes*, *Lumen Gentium*, and *Gaudium et Spes*.

⁴⁹ More work needs to be done to specify convergences and divergences in Christian and Muslim understandings of covenant. In brief, the biblical understanding of covenant, while implying mutual obligations, is ultimately grounded in a sense of faith/trust in God's everlasting love for creation. See, for example, E. Phillips, "They are Loved on Account of the Patriarchs": *Zekhut Avot* and the Covenant with Abraham", in S. A. Hunt (ed.), *Perspectives on our Father Abraham: Essays in Honor of Marvin R. Wilson*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI-Cambridge 2010, 187-220; and S. Ackerman, "The Personal Is Political: Covenantal and Affectionate Love (*'āhēb*, *'ahābā*) in the Hebrew Bible", *Vetus Testamentum* 52 (2002) 437-458. In contrast, it is not clear that the Qur'ānic understanding of covenant includes this notion of divine love. See J. E. B. Lumbard, "Covenant and Covenants in the Qur'an", *The Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17 (2015) 1-23. To be sure, there is development in notions of covenant even within a single scriptural tradition. Noachide, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic versions of the covenant in the Bible, it is well-known, are differently nuanced. Further research may show similar development in the Qur'ān. One study that treats the varied versions of covenant in the Bible (and the challenges of reconciling them) is J. D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*, Winston Press, Minneapolis MN 1987.

by the divine power of Jesus Christ but, more specifically, its role in that respect only insofar as it recognizes that the religious space that it inhabits in this world is also inhabitable by other communities – and that on their own terms.

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RÉSUMÉ : Un aspect des relations entre chrétiens et musulmans encore très peu exploré, c'est la manière dont la rencontre islamo-chrétienne offre un forum spirituel, non pas pour une découverte « moderne » de soi dans le miroir de l'autre, mais pour que les membres des deux traditions s'aident mutuellement – consciemment ou non, directement ou indirectement – à découvrir un sens plus riche de l'action de Dieu dans leurs vies. J'examine ici un point particulier de cet aspect de l'histoire des relations entre chrétiens et musulmans, en me concentrant sur une sélection d'écrits qui illustrent la manière dont les musulmans se sont tournés vers une idée typiquement sinon exclusivement chrétienne, à savoir la recreation miséricordieuse de la condition humaine par Dieu, pour exprimer *leurs propres* expériences et intuitions spirituelles. En ce sens, la rencontre est mieux conçue non pas en termes d'influence causale mais comme un espace commun dans lequel les voies de Dieu sont plus pleinement réalisées.